

Local action groups and revitalization processes in the rural areas

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Introduction

Rural areas, defined according to the methodology of the CSO [Central Statistical Office – Główny Urząd Statystyczny], are areas located outside the administrative boundaries of cities. In 2007, they accounted for more than 93% of the total area of the country and were inhabited by 38.8% of the total population. More and more often the need to include small towns (up to 5 thousand inhabitants) in this category is highlighted (*Zarys kierunków...*, 2009, p. 4). The rationale for such action is the fact that they perform functions similar to the functions of large villages, being centers of commune authorities, and it were mainly the historical reasons that have decided about their status (town, village).

Rural areas are spatially diverse. Their level of socio-economic development and functions are determined by many factors. One of the most important is the geographical location of rural areas with relation to large cities. From this point of view one can distinguish areas closely related to the big city, within the range of influence of a large city and peripheral areas.

Peripheral rural areas are generally characterized by numerous problems. The most important include: lower quality of life resulting from the specificity of dominant functions (agriculture, forestry), lack of alternative sources of income, aging population and depopulation processes.

The biggest challenge is the alignment of disproportions between urban and rural areas, mainly in the context of increased access of rural residents to public goods and the improvement of their quality of life. These activities are closely linked to renewal processes. For them, to be consistent, they should be included in development strategies and zoning plans. What is important is the local community's grassroots initiative, as it is local community that knows its problems best.

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This article aims to identify the role and importance of local action groups (LAGs) in the process of revitalization of rural areas and indication of instruments supporting this activity. Article is based on the study of literature, analysis of program documents of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, analysis of legal documents and statistical data.

1. Local action groups, their nature and functions

Local Action Groups are a specific form of cross-sector partnerships, established in order to increase the group of people and entities wishing to participate in shaping the development of their territory ("little homeland") as well as to co-decide and participate in the implementation of the undertaken actions.

The existence of local action groups is closely associated with the Community Initiative LEADER, established in the early 90s of the last century, which was an attempt to streamline the methodology and rationality of spending public funds, to ensure sustainable development of rural areas (Budzich-Szukała, 2008, p. 118). Seven main principles of which practical implementation should stop the negative processes and phenomenon commonly found in these areas have been identified. These assumptions were:

1. the territorial approach - a specific area (micro-region) is the beneficiary rather than individual projects;
2. bottom-up approach - implementation of various activities should follow the will of the local community, which has the deepest knowledge of their problems and needs;
3. the integrated approach - based on cross-sector thinking; the implementation of projects should lead to cooperation and combining resources of various partners, but to have a complementary action, they should be part of the development strategy that the local community generates by itself;
4. the partnership approach - assumes that all interested parties should be able to decide about the directions of development, which is expressed by forming partnerships constituting a formal agreement between entities from different sectors; it is important at the same time for the partnerships to be open to new members and encourage them to participate;
5. the innovative approach - the LEADER initiative itself is innovative, but it is important to support the implementation of the activities initiated by LAG, which

through its innovative poses greater risk, but their implementation could lead to a substantial increase in value added;

6. decentralization of management and finance – what is important is the awareness of self-government of partnerships, and to shorten the procedures for applying for financial support;
7. cooperation and "networking" - LAG collaboration with other groups, both in the country and abroad.

Documents of the current programming period (*Development programme...*, 2007) define a the Leader initiative as a bottom-up partnership approach to the development of rural areas, implemented by local action groups, based on creating a local development strategy by local rural community (LDS) and the implementation of resulting innovative projects combining human, natural, cultural and historical resources, the knowledge and skills of the representatives from three sectors: public, economic and social. Representatives of these sectors form a partnership called the local action group, which is representative of the area covered by the LDS. It is also important that at the LGD's decision-making level economic and social partners constitute at least 50%.

In order to be granted support, local action groups must have a legal entity status and they can be organized in only three organizational and legal forms, that is in the form of a foundation, association or union of associations. Additionally, within each of these forms, there is the possibility of obtaining the status of public benefit organization. Public benefit activity is an activity socially useful, ran in a specific area of public tasks (Article 4 of the Act of 24 April 2003 on Public Benefit Activity and Volunteerism, referred to as the PBO [Public Benefit Organization]). From the standpoint of LAG the following categories of actions important are (Adams et al., 2006, p. 47):

- promotion of employment and professional activation of the unemployed and those threatened with dismissal,
- activity supporting economic development, including the development of entrepreneurship,
- activity supporting the development of local communities,
- culture, arts, protection of culture goods and tradition,
- ecology and protection of animals and the protection of natural heritage,
- efforts towards European integration and the development of contacts and cooperation between societies,

- activities supporting non-governmental organizations and religious entities with technical, training, informational or financial help (if their statutory objectives include running a public benefit activity.)

One of the key benefits of achieving the status of a public benefit organization (PBO) is undoubtedly inspiring confidence not only in dealing with outside partners, but also in relation to the partners representing various sectors and participating in LAG. Transparency of operation, a clear separation of ownership forms and specific principles of financial management give a better guarantee of proper case handling. These benefits may be particularly important in the perception of LAG as a trustee of funds allocated for the implementation of local development strategies, including the entity deciding on the selection of projects related to the processes of revitalisation of rural areas.

Current support in creating and functioning of local action groups was connected with the implementation of a Pilot Programme LEADER + (PPL +) as action 2.7 under the Sectoral Operational Programme 'Restructuring and modernisation of the Food Sector and the development of rural areas 2004-2006' (SOP Agriculture). PPL + implementation was divided into two so-called patterns. The 1st pattern has been implemented since the end of 2004 until the end of 2006 and included activities such as:

1. supporting the preparation of the development strategy of rural areas (IRDS)¹⁹,
2. supporting the process of establishing LAG,
3. promotion of rural areas and
4. mobilizing the population to actively participate in the process of the development of rural areas.

The 2nd pattern was implemented from March 2006 until the end of 2008 and included:

1. supporting LAG activities for the implementation of the strategy,
2. promotion of rural areas,
3. mobilizing the population to actively participate in the process of the development of rural areas.
4. popularising and exchanging information on initiatives related to the activation of the population in rural areas²⁰.

¹⁹ This strategy was quite unfortunately defined at the SOP Agriculture as an integrated rural development strategy (IRDS), which could mean a need for creating an integrated strategy, and not a need for an integrated development. In the RDP 2007-2013 this strategy is defined as local development strategy (LDS).

²⁰ In brief, we can conclude that the 1st pattern was used to support the establishment of partnership and the registration of local action groups, and the 2nd pattern allowed registered groups for the creation of the strategy.

Budget measures, although originally planned for the amount of EUR 18.75 million, eventually as a result of transfers of funds increased to EUR 30.44 million. Finally, 316 LGD benefited from this financial support (167 in the 1st pattern and 149 in the 2nd pattern).

The dominant legal form in which local action groups were formed, were the associations and unions of associations (68%). Foundations formed the rest. The average contract value in the 2nd pattern amounted to approximately PLN 650 thousand. Projects were implemented in 865 communes at the area of 125.5 km², inhabited by nearly 7 million people. In the strategies of the integrated development of rural areas prepared by local action groups most frequently occurring theme was the use of natural and cultural resources and improving the quality of life in rural areas.

It is estimated that, despite the relatively short period of operation and many difficulties encountered in the course of its activities²¹, local action groups are a confirmation of the importance of the LEADER approach in the development of rural areas. Many reports compiled for the European Commission shows that (Budzych-Szukała, 2008, p. 125):

- this is a very effective method of rural development, because it works in all socio-economic conditions,
- it is a rational method of spending funds, because it integrates central programs and local entities, thus satisfying the needs of local communities
- it is an effective method of activating other sources of funding (private funding is involved).

In Poland, the process of implementation of the PPL+ is evaluated very positively, mainly due to the interest of rural communities in creating partnerships that shape the development, which will be more in line with the needs of local communities and will lead to the improvement of life quality. Importantly, local partnerships implementing the LEADER approach are open to cooperation and acquiring new skills. This is proved by both the National Network LEADER + as well as established regional networks of local action groups.

2. The specificity of revitalisation processes in rural areas

²¹ U. Budzych-Szukała indicates that these difficulties resulted from the failure of adjusting organizational and legal forms to a specificity of the LEADER approach, the inability of financial support by local governments, lack of pre-financing of activities, lack of support at the stage of forming groups, etc. [Budzych-Szukała, 2008, p. 123-124].

The concept of 'revitalization' is a medical term, and comes from the Latin *vitalis* (vital, life-giving). It means restoring fitness and vital forces to the old people (*Słownik...*). More and more often, this term is also used in the field of urban planning and architecture, and means all activities focused on the revitalization of degraded areas or facilities and on enhancing their functionality, aesthetics, using convenience and the quality of life. These activities include construction works, spatial planning, economics and social policy. Therefore, two meanings of the word revitalization appear here: technical, related to the renovation of facilities, and socio-economic, associated with giving them new functions (Idziak).

Renewal processes are typically associated with solving the problems of modern cities. In Poland, they mainly relate to the revitalization of abandoned city centers, which have lost their function as commercial centers, improving the quality of life and recreating social ties in housing estates, rendering post-industrial lands or areas abandoned by the military habitable.

Degradation of the areas or facilities is also typical for the village. Polish countryside has a great number of interesting objects, many of which have a historic rural layout or are part of a manor-park complex and are not always listed in the register of historic monuments [Radeberg-Skorzysko]. Many of those objects are part of our cultural heritage. Mostly these are farm buildings with interesting architecture, old distilleries, mills, schools, inns and hotels, forges and old manorial farm buildings. Their potential lies in the specificity of the village and its surrounding landscape.

Polish countryside has unique functions which are quite different from the urban ones and has unique resources and values for the survival of which one should particularly strive for. Such efforts are part of the European village renewal movement which began in the 80s of the last century. One of the most comprehensive approach in this area is *A Strategy for Rural Europe* developed in 1994 by experts from the European Village Regeneration Movement - ECOVAST – (*Strategia ...*, 1995).

The idea of revitalizing rural areas, commonly known as the village regeneration, is multipronged. On the one hand, it is primarily an endless process of adapting to the social and economic internal and external changes. On the other hand - although the regeneration seeks to preserve tradition - its main purpose is to include 'the value of rural life in a progressive trend of civilizational changes' (Błąd, 2005, p. 207). It is also the direction of the development of rural areas, which manifests itself in village regeneration programmes.

Revitalization of rural areas is undoubtedly a multipronged process, because it concerns: rural economic conditions, material conditions of the inhabitants, non-material needs and the identity of the village (Wilczyński, 2003). Thus, it includes the realm of the local community, economy, architecture, culture and environment. It is a varied process in terms of space and time, which depends primarily on what in a given place and at a given time is understood as improvement of life in the rural areas (Idziak, 2004).

The causative factor in the process of revitalization of rural areas is the local community that not only is the subject of the change, but also their animator. Thanks to this the process of the revitalization of the village is part of a trend of thought and action, defined as the LEADER initiative. What is characteristic for this initiative is that it involves principles such as: bottom-up approach, community involvement, partnership and collaboration, complexity and innovation of action, subsidiarity and co-financing of developmental activities. They have a crucial role in activating rural population in terms of shaping their own lives. It is necessary to agree with the statement that 'every village has something unique, that you need to discover first and then use it as a factor of local development and improvement of the quality of life' (Błąd, 2005, p. 209).

Initially, the regeneration of European villages developed mainly in the field of preserving traditional buildings, and then creating jobs, but now the quality of life in rural areas becomes more important (Wilczyński, 2008, p. 99-100). Universality and the high rank of plans for village regeneration, which is understood as 'a comprehensive and detailed definition of the functions and the manner of development', bears fruit in the form of not only high quality of projects, but also a comprehensive, covering both public and private buildings, regeneration of the village. Unused farm buildings are given new functions and effort is taken to preserve appropriate structure of the objects. As R. Wilczyńska points out, '(...) achieving the objectives of revitalization in the form of high standards of material living conditions allows to concentrate the effort on the social aspects of regeneration - maintaining the attractiveness and vitality of the village through authentic, engaging all inhabitants, community life (spiritual renewal of the village). This is reflected in the activities that shape the space in a village in a way which builds the identity of local communities' (Wilczyński, 2008, p. 100-101). In the course of gaining experience various models of village regeneration have been developed. One of them is creating village centres, based on emphasizing special qualities of meeting places of the residents along with the development of a motive which with time could become the beginning of a thematic village. Creating thematic villages is very popular (eg, recreation

and relaxation village, village of monocycles, village of blacksmiths, wine village, etc.). A special, slightly more mature model, in comparison with a thematic village, is a model of an idea - village, which integrates the target function and the already existing, but requiring further conscious development of the character of village space. Yet another model is organizing mass events, treated as a prelude to building a specific character of a village (Wilczyński, 2008, p. 112).

Currently, revitalization of rural areas is part of a comprehensive policy for integrated rural development of the European Union. In 2004-2006 Polish countryside could pursue projects related to its regeneration with the financial support from the 2.7 action 'Village regeneration and the preservation and protection of cultural heritage' under the SOP Agriculture. These projects aimed to:

- improve the standard of living and working in rural areas,
- improve touristic attractiveness,
- increase investment attractiveness
- meet social and cultural needs
- develop the identity of rural community and to preserve cultural heritage.

Additional financing (reimbursement of part of the investment costs) was granted to the following projects in the field of:

- upgrading and equipping of cultural, recreational and sporting facilities
- regeneration of historic buildings characteristic for rural building traditions of the region and their adaptation for public purposes,
- modernization of the rural public space,
- public infrastructure contributing to the development of village's tourism functions and activities related to the promotion of the region.

Maximum level of funding amounted to 80% of eligible costs. Every beneficiary eligible to benefit from the action (rural commune, urban and rural commune or cultural institution, for which a local government unit is the organizer) could apply for a grant for one or more projects, but the amount of support for one village in the whole financing period could not exceed PLN 450 thousand. Monitoring of the implementation of the 'Village regeneration and the preservation and protection of cultural heritage' action, indicates that the program was attended by 1199 communes, which constitutes 55.2% of those eligible (*Działanie...*, 2008). 2025 projects for a total amount of PLN 642.4 million have been implemented. This means that some of the communes realized more than one project from the granted funds. Overall, the activity of the communes in this area is

assessed as very positive. experience that the local authorities in rural areas gained in connection with applying for funds from the structural funds is of particular importance. This experience will certainly be used in the current programming period. Of course, there were also some errors. As R. Wilczyński rightly points out '(...) unfavourable phenomenon of aiming to achieve tangible effects while minimizing expenditures took place, in which the objective need to adapt projects to local and regional characteristics of space as well as heritage and cultural landscape has not been maintained' (Wilczyński, 2008, p. 110).

3. Role and significance of LAG in the process of revitalization

As highlighted in the preceding paragraph, in the process' of revitalization of rural areas the initiative of local communities is of key importance. Since this initiative is part of the LEADER programme concept, and local action groups are its practical aspect, we can assume that from a formal point of view, these groups will play a significant role in the implementation of tasks related to village regeneration.

Current programming period has significantly strengthened the role of LAG in decision-making processes regarding the implementation of local development strategies, including the processes of regeneration. These groups were given authorisation to make the selection of projects to be implemented within the resources allocated for the implementation of the strategy. In addition, LAG staff was obliged to ensure comprehensive assistance to applicants in preparing projects. These projects should qualify for a grant support under Axis 3: 'Quality of life in rural areas and the diversification of rural economy', namely:

- 'Diversification into non-agricultural activities',
- 'Establishment and development of micro enterprises',
- 'Village regeneration and development'

and other projects called "small projects" that do not qualify for support under axis 3, but contribute to achieving the objectives of this axis, ie improving the quality of life or a greater diversification of economic activities in the area of the LAG.

It should be noted that not all local action groups will have so far advanced decision-making powers. This applies only to those groups that will be selected through the call for proposals for the implementation of LDS, submitted to the regional government. In the assessment of these proposals two aspects are taken into account, namely:

- organizational and administrative potential of LAG - including the structure of the decision-making body, rules and procedures of extending the membership,

selection procedure, criteria for project assessment by LAG, previous activity of LAG or of the partners forming LAG, qualifications and experience of the members of the decision-making body,

- quality of local development strategy (LDS) - particularly the relationship and consistency of the adopted course of development in LDS along with local conditions, SWOT analysis, objectives of the LDS, the adequacy of submitted projects and purpose, integrated nature of LDS, innovative solutions and actions, ensuring the participation of local partners and residents in the preparation and implementation or upgrading of LDS, the budget along with a timetable of undertakings under LDS, linkage with other planning documents.

In 2008, regional governments have announced competitions for the recruitment of local action groups to implement local development strategy under the RDP 2007-2013. Along with the application also a first request for aid under the measure 'Functioning of a local action group, skills acquisition and activation' was submitted. Aid granted to LAG may include in particular:

- research over the area covered by LDS
- informing about the area covered by LAG and LDS
- training of staff involved in the implementation of LDS
- promotional events for the area covered by LAG and LDS
- training of local leaders,
- animating local communities
- LAG current costs (administrative costs associated with the activities of LAG).

The total budget for amounts to EUR 152 million. As on 31st March 2010, 681 applications for assistance have been submitted. 626 contracts have been signed. 588 payments amounting to PLN 7.44 mln have been carried out. In all regions LAGs have been selected to implement LDS. 338 LAGs have been selected [*PROWieści*, 2009].

The main role of local action groups (chosen by the regional government) is to select projects of the applicants who apply for funding to the amount of the budget, which was provided for the implementation of local development strategy. This means that only projects which are most consistent with the development directions set by the strategy will be implemented. For the implementation of local development strategies an amount of EUR 496.4 million has been allocated. Until 31st March 2010, 4783 applications have been submitted, and the contracts were signed only with 3 entities.

Table 1. Progress in the implementation of 413 "Implementing local development strategies" on 31st March 2010

| Specification | Limit of funds for action (UE contribution) mln euro | Total amount of applications submitted | The amount of contracts mln zł | |
|---|--|--|--------------------------------|-------|
| | | | total | EAFRD |
| Implementing local development strategies, including: | 496.4 | 4783 | 417.01 | 263.1 |
| Small projects | – | 3727 | 88.3 | 56.1 |
| Differentiation towards non-agricultural activities | – | 52 | 2.8 | 2.2 |
| Establishment and development of micro-enterprises | – | 99 | 7.5 | 6.1 |
| Village renewal and development | – | 905 | 318.3 | 198.7 |

Source: own study based on [Bieżące...].

From the perspective of rural revitalization projects LAGs will examine projects within the framework of 'Village regeneration and development' action and the so called small projects, taking into account particularly preservation of the local cultural and historical heritage, including:

- reconstruction or renovation or marking small architecture buildings and facilities listed in the register of historic monuments or regional recors of historic monuments,
- restoration of the roofs or facades of buildings listed in the register of historic monuments or regional recors of historic monuments,
- repair or equipping museums,
- repair or equipping of rural community centers.

Most compatible with the essence of revitalizing rural areas is the 'Village regeneration and development' action. It includes financial assistance due to the implementation of investments, which include:

- 1.construction, reconstruction, repair or equipping facilities:
 - a) performing public, socio-cultural, recreational and sport functions
 - b) designed to promote rural areas, including the promotion and preservation of historical heritage, traditions, art and culture;
- 2.shaping public space;

3. building, renovating or reconstructing infrastructure related to the development of tourism, sports and socio-cultural functions;
4. purchase of objects characteristic for the building tradition of the region, including historic monument buildings to be used for public purposes;
5. restoration, display or preservation of local historical monuments, buildings that are historic monuments or places of memory;
6. cultivating traditions of the local community and traditional professions.

Obtaining financial assistance requires the fulfilment of several basic conditions. First of them, is the requirement of implementing an investment at a village not exceeding five thousand residents and belonging to a rural commune or rural and urban commune or urban commune. Another condition is related to the requirement of including the project in the Village Regeneration Plan. This is one of the most important documents related to the plan of rural revitalisation and to the plan of their development and the improvement of the living conditions of the rural population. It also constitutes a basis for applying for financial support from the 'Village regeneration and development' action under the RDP 2007-2013 (*Rozporządzenie...*). Undertakings indicated in the plan have to improve the quality of life in rural areas, satisfy social and cultural needs of the rural population, promote rural areas. Furthermore, they should enable the development of the rural community identity, cultural preservation and the specificity of rural areas and affect the growth of tourist and investment attractiveness. Since the local community should participate in the preparations of the plan, under the aegis of the 'village regeneration group', the functions of such a group can be taken by the local action groups. Village Regeneration Plans should take the form of a resolution of the Commune Council and should include in particular: the characteristics of the village, the inventory of resources for the regeneration of the village, assessment of strong and weak sides of the village and a description of the planned investment projects and projects activating local community for at least seven years.

Only non-commercial projects can apply for the financial support of 'Village regeneration and development'. In addition, a non-governmental organization applying for assistance should be operational in the area coinciding with the objectives of its action, especially when it comes to the activation of the population, the development and preservation of cultural or natural heritage. Whereas, if the applicant is a cultural institution subordinated to the local government unit, its project should be approved by that unit. The maximum amount of subsidy for projects in one village amounts to PLN 500

thousand (about EUR 128 thousand), whereas the amount of subsidy granted for the implementation of one project may not be less than PLN 25 thousand (EUR 6.4 thousand). A commune, a cultural institution (which is organized by a local government unit), a church or other religious association or a non-governmental organization having the status of a public benefit organization can be the beneficiary of the subsidy. Since, as previously mentioned, such a status could be granted to any LAG which has legal personality, it means that it can apply for financial support in this field. Obviously this can not be a LAG, which was chosen to implement strategies for local development. However, due to territorial separation (the area of operation of one group can not overlap with an area of another group) LAG activity should not be mirrored.

The total budget of 'village renewal and development' for 2007-2013 represents the amount of EUR 442.185 million. As on 31st March 2010 across the country 3109 applications for a total amount of PLN 2,061.1 mln have been submitted, and 2566 contracts amounting to PLN 1,373.1 mln have been signed. 140 payment for the amount of PLN 26.38 mln have been completed (*Bieżąca...*)²². However, within the framework of 'Implementing local development strategies' for the implementation of projects related to rural renewal by 31st March 2010, 905 applications for a total amount of PLN 318.3 mln have been reported (Table 1). Two contracts amounting to PLN 1.6 million have been signed. Taking into account both the number of applications, as well as the value of the projects, it should be noted that beyond the 'small projects' under the 'Implementation of local development strategies', projects of rural renewal are of the biggest interest.

A team of experts preparing an expert's report on the impact of the RDP 2007-2013 on the environment, notices both positive and negative effects of allowing local action groups to implement local development strategies [Forecast ...]. The benefits certainly include the involvement of local communities in the process of managing local development. The LEADER Initiative, according to the authors, 'creates an immense potential of support for local cultural resources - both material and spiritual - as a key element in building local development strategies' (*Prognoza...*). This may lead to a very positive impact on the consciousness of citizens, their sensitivity towards tradition, history, contact with the material testimonies of the past. Unfortunately, the documentation requirements of the RDP lack clear highlight of the role of cultural values of the region in local development

²² It should be emphasized that the RDP 2007-2013 provides the possibility of the implementation of projects, both within the 313 *Village renewal* and as part of the 413 *Implementing local development strategies*.

strategies, which may lead to a clearly instrumental treatment of those values, used primarily for promotional purposes, marketing purposes.

Another very important issue that has not been adequately emphasized in the programming document, is the issue of space management. If one takes into account the fact that the action of 'Implementing local development strategies' will cover much of the country (an estimated 40-50% of the rural areas), then it must also be assumed that this action would affect the area's transformation. 'In created programs and strategies it should be treated as a resource, a subject to protection against devastation and appropriation like other natural resources' (*Prognoza...*). Treating space as a resource, and especially the awareness of its limitations and systematic depletion as well as increasing competition from the perspective of many functions (tourist, recreation, agriculture, construction, etc.) are relatively weakly realized. Lack in the structures of local action groups of people or entities who feel the problems of space and have basic knowledge in the field of management may lead to serious repercussions and the implemented projects instead promoting renewal processes can increase the problems of rural areas²³.

Valuable cultural values, such as farm buildings or rural technology monuments, are often in private hands. Unfortunately, in the program documents they have been omitted, which may contribute to their rapid degradation.

Revitalization should promote sustainable development. Local development strategies, especially projects in its framework, should take this aspect into account. However, this requires local action groups, deciding on the eligibility of a project, to have specialists from the field of sustainable development, or a group that has worked with such professionals. Lack of such requirements may lead to an increase of environmental pollution or to excessive consumption of resources.

Awareness of the risks that may occur during the completion and implementation of the projects, in which local action groups will play an important role, is extremely important. Rational management of space should be allowed for the benefit of both present and future generations living in rural areas in accordance with the vision: 'Rural areas should become an attractive place for work, housing, leisure and agricultural activity or off-farm activity, preserving the unique natural, scenic and culture of these sites for future generations' (*Zarys ...*).

²³ This issue was also mentioned by R. Wilczyński, while assessing the implementation of 'Village renewal' of the SOP Agriculture. He wrote: 'the participation of spatial planning and experts advice in formulating the concept of development was minor' [Wilczyński, 2008, p. 110].

4. Concluding remarks

Considerations presented in this paper indicate that local action groups become a permanent part of the institutional system of rural areas in Poland. Although the dissemination of the idea of their establishment occurred only just in the years 2004-2006, every year the role and significance of LAG will steadily increase. They are favored by the regulations associated with obtaining financial support from the Structural Funds in the current programming period, and especially the empowerment of local action groups in the processes of participation in the selection of investment projects directly related to the implementation of local development strategies. Since these projects mainly concern the processes of revitalization, it is clear that local action groups will substantially participate in shaping the image of the Polish countryside. On the other hand, those groups that were not selected for the implementation of the LDS, can actively seek financial support for projects of a broader concept of rural renewal.

Notwithstanding, the extent to which LAG will be the beneficiary of public aid, the greatest benefit from their creation is certainly promoting the idea of grass-roots initiatives and partnership in active shaping of living conditions of the inhabitants of 'little homelands'.

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Summary

The article makes an attempt at estimating the role and importance of local action groups (LAGs) in revitalization processes in the rural areas. First of all, the essence of LAGs was explained as well as their fundamental functions. Next, the nature of revitalization processes in the rural areas and their conditions were described. The role of LAGs was identified based on this background, especially during creation and implementation of the local development strategy. Moreover, opportunities of financial support for LAGs activity within this scope were presented.

Key words: local action group, revitalization, rural areas